

Letter from Scotland

I've just come home from a cycling holiday along the River Tweed. It's a quiet, majestic river which meanders unconcerned through what used to be the disputed borderlands between two rival kingdoms. Berwick-upon-Tweed, for instance, has changed hands 13 times over the centuries and still doesn't quite know whether it's in England or Scotland. Its football team, for instance, plays in the Scottish League, despite the town being in England, for the moment!

The river itself marks the border for 12 or its 97 miles. We crossed a rickety old suspension bridge near Paxton, built in 1820, which bears the name "The Union Bridge" and connects Scotland with England. It is in need of major repairs, just like the Union it represents.

The Tweed is Scotland's biggest salmon fishing river but it too needs major repairs. 2018 was the worst season ever recorded, with just 5,500 salmon caught. That compares with 23,000 eight short years ago. The reasons are many – climate change, over-fishing at sea, seals at the river mouth, cormorants and goosander. Anglers have to limit themselves to catch-and-return for the first half of the season. Average permit costs have dropped from £400 a day to nearer £200 and

the value of fishing to the local economy has fallen by half from £24m back in 2015.

The Borders Region as a whole is still recovering from the almost total collapse of the textile industry and the false start in electronics. Unemployment is falling (by half in the last five years) but wages are low and better prospects depend on more private house-building and more public spending on projects like extending the Borders Railway and sport and tourism infrastructure.



Quiet flows the Tweed at Coldstream
And yet as I cycled through rich
farmland and prosperous-looking estates –especially those
long, stone,
well-maintained walls – the Borders seemed like a good place

to live. Each small town was either putting up or taking down the bunting for its gala week. Wynsome Maydes or Herring Queens or Braw Lads were being crowned. Common Ridings, involving dozens of horses were taking place, along with football matches, bowling competitions, quiz nights, dinner dances and ceilidhs.

In the central square in Kelso the local MP John Lamont was handing out his latest newsletter in preparation for the town's Civic Week. He told me he was backing Jeremy Hunt in the race for the Conservative party leadership. I guess he wasn't among the eleven Scottish Tory MPs (out of 13) who bowed down before Boris Johnson, now they've concluded he is about to become Prime Minister. In return for their support he's apparently promised them to be his own "Minister for the Union" and to consult them frequently.

And well he might. Departing Theresa May has warned that the Union must be the new Prime Minister's top priority. And the Labour PM before her, Gordon Brown, issued a similar warning this week. He said Boris might well prove to be the last Prime Minister of the United Kingdom as the twin forces of Scottish and English nationalism grind against each other. He's announced the formation of a new think tank to put the case for "social justice" and Scotland's continued membership of the EU.

We've been beating ourselves with rods of guilt and shame this week over the latest figures on drug-related deaths. They've reached a record 1,187 last year, the highest rate in the whole of Europe and three times the rate in the rest of Britain. It's partly due to a legacy of drug misuse stretching back to the 80s, the years of de-industrialisation and mass unemployment. But it may also be due to the criminalisation of drug taking and, ironically the under-prescribing of methadone. It's argued that doctors trying to

wean addicts off drugs with smaller and small doses of methadone are in fact forcing their patients to buy extras supplies of impure heroin or cocaine from street dealers.

The SNP are blaming the London government for standing in the way of an official drug consumption room in Glasgow where addicts could safely inject themselves but also have their underlying problems addressed. The Conservatives are calling for a total reassessment of the methadone programme and for more resources to be put into complete rehabilitation.

We've been reeling too from a court case in Glasgow which exposed our species' capacity for greed and cruelty. A shambolic couple from Inverkip, were convicted of killing the vulnerable girl they were supposed to be looking after and claiming her social security benefits for nearly 18 years. Her body has never been found. The judge sentenced each of them to 14 years in prison.

We've also been worrying about the number of dog attacks which seem to be on the rise. "Thousands" of people are said to be treated in hospital each year for dog bites. The Scottish Parliament has had various attempts at legislation to address the problem but this week MSPs declared that none of them are fit for purpose. So it's back to the drawing board. Should there be a dog licence system, should local councils be given more powers and resources, why is the electronic chipping system not working? My answer is there are too many dogs (550,000) in Scotland, too many of them are fighting dogs and too many owners have no idea how to train or control their dogs.

Finally, to lift the gloom, a 25ft pink yacht appeared in the Trongate in the middle of Glasgow on Monday night. It gybed

right across the street and sat there as if searching for the River Clyde or the indeed the Tweed. It turned out to be the latest publicity stunt from the Extinction Revolution campaign and on the sail was written "Act now against climate change."

We have so many problems to solve don't we?